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| Professional Development and Mentoring |
| Professional Development, On-site Mentoring, and the Use of Data: Effects on Teacher Knowledge and Classroom Practice |
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| ABSTRACT: This article seeks to examine two federally-funded early literacy projects, one an Early Reading First demonstration project, the other an Early Childhood Educators Professional Development research study. It describes the respective professional development models that include onsite mentoring support to improve teacher quality. The article also illustrates the use of child-level and classroom data to demonstrate change in both teacher knowledge and classroom practice, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children in early childhood classrooms. |

Introduction – Teacher Quality in Early Childhood Education

Research indicates there are positive impacts on children’s learning when strategic investments are made in early education (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Barnett, 2004; Raudenbush, 2009). This investment can be a way to both *increase* teacher quality in early learning environments; as well as prove to be a powerful equalizer by *decreasing* the glaring ethnic and racial gaps in children’s school readiness (Brooks-Gunn, 2005, Raudenbush, 2009).

The online archives of the U.S. Department of Education states the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed during the first session of the 107th Congress on January 3, 2001, was enacted with the purpose to “close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (USDOE, NCLB 2001). Charged with the responsibility of “providing financial assistance to State and local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, community and faith-based organizations, and other entities focused on the improvement of student achievement” (USDOE, 2009) the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) administers a portfolio of formula and discretionary grant programs funded through the Academic Improvement and Teacher Quality Program totaling over $4.5 billion per year. This article will examine two of its programs, Early Reading First (ERF) funded through Title 1 (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged) and the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECEPD) funded through Title II (Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals). Both programs are authorized to promote school readiness and improve literacy and learning outcomes of children living in high-poverty communities. We will view these programs through one organization’s efforts to improve the early language and literacy opportunities for preschool children in three urban communities. To guide the reader this paper will situate each of the respective projects and provide descriptive details of the professional development and onsite mentoring protocols utilized to transform theory into practice, as well as examine the quantitative and qualitative data collected - specific to each project - and how this information influenced the literacy intervention. We will conclude by presenting implications for future professional development projects specifically in the use of mentors to bridge the transformation between teacher knowledge and classroom practice; as well as considerations about the collection, analysis, and the use of data to inform and promote positive change in early learning environments.

Early Reading First: Policy and Goals

With a growing body of evidence from the field indicating that early exposure to oral language and literacy skills places young children at an advantage for later reading achievement (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Justice & Vukelich, 2008) policymakers have been pushed to institute new initiatives that change instructional practices in early childhood programs (Mashburn, 2008). To inform these instructional practices most states have either implemented or are developing early learning standards detailing what young children should know and be able to do prior to entering kindergarten (NCCIC 2009). Under George W. Bush’s administration the “Good Start, Grow Smart” initiative was implemented and Early Reading First (ERF) was one program designed to “transform existing early education programs into centers of excellence” by providing high-quality, early education to young children, especially those from low-income families.

The overall purpose of the Early Reading First program is to prepare young children to enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to prevent reading difficulties and ensure school success” (USDOE, ERF). Programs awarded this discretionary competitive grant must, (a) provide high-quality oral language and literacy-rich environments, (b) provide professional development to staff that is based on research knowledge of early language and reading development, (c) identify and provide activities and instructional materials based on research to develop children’s language, cognitive, and early reading skills, (d) use screening assessments to determine whether young children are developing the cognitive skills they need for later reading success, and (e) integrate these materials, activities, tools, and measures into preschool programs.

From ERF’s National Evaluation we learn the intervention was to “directly influence teachers’ experience and qualifications through professional development and to influence the classroom environment through the materials and activities in the classroom and through teacher-child interactions” (Russell et al., p.5). The conceptual model of the program depicts the quality of teachers’ instruction and the classroom environment as “central factors in determining the impact of ERF on children’s literacy and language outcomes” (Russell et al., p.5).

Overview of an ERF Demonstration Project

In this section we will describe the context of the project, the collaborating programs, and the professional development model implemented to influence positive literacy outcomes for children. We will then focus on the use of child-level data quantitative data, how information was presented to teachers and families, and its ultimate use to influence professional development and teacher practice.

This three-year ERF project was funded in 2004 and included 12 classrooms situated in three educational settings: Head Start, publicly-funded inclusion preschool learning environments, and community-based classrooms. All programs were located in low-income neighborhoods and the children and families reflected the growing immigrant population from Central America, the Caribbean, and West Africa. Local data informs us that 41% of children in this capital city live in poverty, 36% are born to mothers who have dropped out of school, and 25% of the households do not speak English (U.S. Census, 2006). Research shows that poverty is a reliable predictor of children’s readiness for school (Snow, 2001; Duncan & Magnuson, 2003) and is demonstrated by 45% of entering kindergarten children scoring below the benchmark for a literacy screening assessment (PPSD, 2005). This trend continues as children move along their academic careers as the city’s 2006 New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) scores indicate that only 29% of 3rd graders were proficient in reading and 35% in writing.

The project selected Scholastic’s Building Language for Literacy (BLL) authored by Dr. Susan Neuman and Dr. Catherine Snow, as the research-based classroom curriculum proven effective in increasing children’s language development (LAUSD, 2001).  Monthly professional development sessions were facilitated by the project’s Director and two Literacy Coaches. Each session followed an anticipated protocol of: Review of Action Plans, providing teachers an opportunity to share literacy activities and assessment data implemented during the previous month; BLL curriculum themes; as well as professional development based on reading research to encourage children’s oral language development, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and concepts of print.

Concepts learned during professional development were then supported by onsite Early Literacy Mentors assigned to each program. Mentors were charged with providing 3 hours of classroom support weekly over the three years of the project with each teacher in their program. Working alongside classroom teachers, mentors modeled and implemented early literacy activities, co-planned curriculum, and created professional relationships with teachers, administrators, children, and their families.

The Use of Child-level Data to Enhance Professional Development and Improve Teacher Quality

Children’s language and literacy learning was assessed each fall and spring. The *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test* (PPVT-III; Dunn & Dunn, 1997) was used to capture children’s receptive language development and the *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening* (PALS-PreK; Inverrnizzi, Meier, Swank, and Juel, 1998) assessed children’s name writing, letter recognition, letter sounds, beginning sounds, rhyming, and their understanding of books and reading conventions. Initially, this information was shared by classroom in an Excel format with a series of numbers providing the only detail for each subtest of the literacy assessments. Professional development sessions and onsite mentoring devoted a great deal of time to understanding and then utilizing data to inform teacher practice.

In April 2005, the project developed an individualized format, called a Personal Literacy Plan (PLP) to share data with programs. This literacy tool was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education’s *Doing What Works* a clearinghouse program to disseminate research-based classroom practices. This passage taken from the transcript on the DWW website describes the rationale for the development of PLPs:

Personal Literacy Plans, or PLPs, were developed to satisfy two purposes. The first purpose was to assist teachers in their understanding of data created from formal assessments. When scores from PALS Pre-K and PPVT were initially shared with teachers, the results were not readily understood. So we developed a plan to separate each child’s score as it pertains to sections of these formal assessments. Now teachers could identify individual literacy-related trends in their classrooms and plan for them.

The second purpose was to guide teachers in monitoring students’ progress. Using the PLP, teachers could now track not only how many letters a child recognized, but also which letters. The lesson planning became more specific and, therefore, more useful to the child’s learning. PLPs aren’t an assessment tool. They are a monitoring progress tool, and for planning instruction, they help to streamline teachers’ efforts when planning for literacy instruction. And they also help with differentiation of activities for classrooms (DWW, Zoll 2007).

Appendix A provides an example of a child’s PLP to illustrate how assessment data was presented in a user-friendly way and to demonstrate where each child was in their own early literacy development. With each sub-test score both graphically and numerically displayed, teachers could now see not only how many upper case letters a child could recognize, but which ones and most importantly, those letters that were left for a child to learn. The same process was true of lower case letters and letter sounds. This information provided teachers with an efficient manner to provide small group and one-on-one learning activities in the classroom by providing individualized instruction for all children. PLPs were considered working documents and included notes provided by teachers and ERF staff describing activities that were implemented, as well as children’s work samples. Additional information regarding this project’s Personal Literacy Plans can be found on the U.S. Department of Education’s *Doing What Works* (DWW) website [http://dww.ed.gov/arra/?aID=1&cID=2&l=2&fm=333#](http://dww.ed.gov/arra/?aID=1&cID=2&l=2&fm=333).

This data tool also allowed teachers to provide parents with a more detailed picture of children’s literacy development. Parents informed the project that scores graphed over time demonstrated for many that their child was learning as was made obvious by the upward trajectory of the pre- and post-test scores over time. Dialogue between teachers, ERF personnel, and families, using information learned from the PLPs encouraged home-school connections and supported children’s learning at home.

Early Childhood Educator Professional Development: A Randomized-Control Research Project

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2001) standards for early childhood education programs states that early childhood educators must know how to: promote child learning by creating developmentally appropriate environments, to build relationships with family and community as a way to collaborate in children’s learning, to observe, document, and assess children’s learning, and to utilize a wide array of educational approaches to build a meaningful curriculum.

In an era of states adopting quality rating systems and high-stakes assessment of preschool quality (Dickinson, 2006; Barnett, 2004), Barnett asks, “If a college degree is considered essential for teaching 5 year olds in kindergarten, why isn’t it required for teaching 3- and 4-year olds?” (Barnett, p.2). He goes on to state that the minimum qualification for a preschool teacher should be a four-year degree with specialized training teaching young children. But the reality of the early childhood education system is that less than half of the lead teachers working with 3 and 4 year children have a 4-year degree (Saluja et al. 2002). Since the quality of staff working with children in programs has a major impact on the quality of education, care, and early learning experiences of children (Barnett, 2004), there is an urgency in not just supporting, but of improving the early childhood professional development system.

A growing body of evidence suggests that programs that provide teachers with on-site mentoring, consultation, and technical assistance are linked to better teaching practices and learning environments for young children (Ackerman, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009). The use of mentoring to improve teacher qualifications allows the Professional Development system to positively impact early childhood programs without depending entirely on higher education (Ryan et al. 2004).

In 2006, the program was awarded an Early Childhood Educator’s Professional Development (ECEPD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The project represents a three year study to test the effectiveness of providing early childhood professionals in urban core communities with an intensive year-long intervention that included, two 15-week, three college credit literacy courses and six visits from a literacy mentor. The intervention’s goal was to enhance early childhood educators’ classroom literacy practices and to, in turn, impact the literacy development of the children in their care. Teachers and students recruited for this project lived and worked in neighborhoods identified as some of the most socioeconomically distressed within the State.

During the 2007-08 academic year, 224 early childhood teachers from three educational settings ( Head Start, community-based classrooms, and family child care homes) were recruited and randomly assigned to one of two groups (treatment or control). The treatment group attended two 15-week courses and received six 3-hour, on-site mentor visits to support changes to teachers’ literacy practices. The control group received no intervention from ECEPD staff, with the promise of enrolling in the intervention during the 2008-09 academic year.

The two 45-hour literacy courses, one a video-based intervention called *Heads Up! Reading*, developed by the National Head Start Association; followed by the *Early Literacy Curriculum for Young Children* using the *Opening the World of Learning* (Pearson, OWL) curriculum as its base, enabled teachers to earn 6 undergraduate or graduate credits. Both courses were delivered in separate English and Spanish classes. Similar to the ERF professional development model, a key element in realizing the implementation of theory, were the six onsite mentor visits providing 18 hours of individualized professional development.

Classroom-level Data: Quantifying Qualitative Data

Fourteen Literacy Mentors recruited for the ECEPD project represented diverse cultures, language backgrounds, and professional experience that included deep understanding of early childhood classrooms and previous experience in mentoring. Classroom data collected by ECEPD Mentors ensured that all educators received similar information in courses, as well as during on-site mentoring visits. A reporting instrument, the *Mentor Visit Summary*, tracked the literacy content and mentoring process of each mentor visit (See Appendix B).

Mentors recorded time spent within a project-developed mentoring protocol of Relationship Building, Early Literacy Planning, Observation, Observation Feedback, Implementation / Demonstration, and Reflection. Each of the six ECEPD Mentor Visits also aligned with literacy theory and skills that were concurrently covered in coursework and mentors were asked to focus on specific literacy skills for each visit.

Qualitative data provided from mentors’ fieldnotes were coded by the project’s Data Specialist, allowing the project to track and analyze time spent in the ECEPD mentoring protocol, as well as areas of literacy instruction discussed between the ECEPD mentor and the teacher. This data provided enhanced classroom descriptions that supplemented data from formal assessments used in the project.

By tracking time spent in each of the areas of the ECEPD mentoring protocol, *Mentor Visit Summaries* allowed the project to see nuances in mentoring by classroom setting. Mentors assigned to Head Start classrooms recorded an average of 125 minutes (a range of 114 minutes to 148 minutes) for each classroom visit. Consistently, mentors in this setting recorded the greatest time with teachers in Early Literacy Planning, Observation, and Observation Feedback in the prescribed protocol. While mentors assigned to home care setting documented a longer average visit time of 135 minutes actively involved in the mentoring protocol (with a range of 127 minutes to 144 minutes) with the greatest amount of time devoted to Implementation / Demonstration and Relationship Building. (See Appendix C)

The data provides evidence of fidelity to the professional development model illustrated by time devoted to the Early Literacy Goals associated with each classroom visit and time recorded by mentors in each of the Early Literacy Content areas. Whether working in Head Start classrooms, community based centers, or family child care settings mentors consistently spent the greatest time in the prescribed Literacy Goals across all visits. As an example, the Literacy Goals associated with the first Mentor Visit (HUR1) are: Books, Environmental Print, and Learning Environments (See Appendix B). Analysis of the Mentor Code *Observation* in this visit demonstrates that mentors recorded the greatest percentage of time in the Early Literacy Content Codes: Books (87.6%), Environmental Print (82.0%), and Learning Environments (83.1%) the very goals assigned to the first Mentor Visit. The remaining time, varying from 22.5% to 51.7% of the mentor visit, were distributed among the remaining Early Literacy Content Codes. (See Appendix D)

A similar trend is also seen in Early Literacy Planning in the third Mentor Visit. The Literacy Goals associated with the third Mentor Visit (HUR3) are: Oral Language, Vocabulary, and Phonological Awareness. Analysis of the Mentor Code *Early Literacy Planning* in this visit demonstrates that mentors recorded the greatest percentage of time in the Early Literacy Content Codes: Oral Language (70.5%), Vocabulary (71.8%), and Phonological Awareness (61.5%), again the goals assigned to the third Mentor Visit. The remaining time, varying from 24.4% to 52.6% of time documented within this visit, was also distributed among the remaining Early Literacy Content Codes.

An inference to effective mentoring could be made that the data demonstrates the need for individualization of mentoring relationships, while still accomplishing the mentoring agenda.

Implications for the Field: Mentoring

Research on Mentoring to Improve Teacher Quality

Mentoring from a business perspective has long been regarded as a process that “plays a significant role in the career, retention, and leadership development of employees” and has long been thought to “dramatically enhance employee skills and motivation” (Ochwari & Keengwe, p. 20). These same benefits can be seen in teacher education programs. “Particularly in early childhood education, mentoring provides a means for teachers to enhance their skills” (Ochwari et al., p. 20).

Mentoring can also be a viable tool to accelerate the education reform process (Washington et al., 2009; Maynard and Furlong, 1993) as it can be an effective way to train teachers to adopt new practices (Weaver, 2004); and it provides a way by which professional development can be made available to teachers on a continual basis. Through mentoring, a learning opportunity is created “in which an experienced colleague, the mentor, socializes the learner or protégé to the larger context of an organization, profession, or industry” (Sisakhti 1998, p. 57). The theoretical framework is based on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, 1978) in an early childhood classroom. By working with a more knowledgeable ‘other’, in this case a teacher working with their literacy mentor, together they co-create teacher knowledge and then transform that knowledge into teacher practice.

For over thirty years, early childhood education researchers and child care and preschool practitioners have been trying to link high quality professional development with improved program quality, changes in practitioner skills and knowledge, and enhanced child outcomes. Current approaches to ECE professional development propose that projects are most effective when new ideas and practices are linked to the particular ECE setting and to the practitioner’s specific needs (Grace, Bordelon, Cooper, & Kazelskis, 2008). There is an emerging body of evidence that professional development can be effective if it is tied to specific content, aligned with the curriculum and standards used in the setting, and if it includes coaching or mentoring on how to apply specific practices (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2008). The inclusion of mentoring in professional development programs is supported by research demonstrating that training and education interventions that include mentoring can have a greater impact on teacher behavior and on child outcomes than the training/education component alone (Weber & Trauten, 2008). And programs that provide teachers with on-site mentoring, consultations, and technical assistance are linked to better practice and learning environments for young children (Ackerman, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009).

In a recent study, home-based and center-based practitioners who participated in either a professional development course alone or in the control of no intervention scored significantly lower on the quality of their language and literacy practices than the treatment group that received the credit-bearing course and ongoing mentoring support. It was the work of the mentors that made a positive contribution to scores from classroom environment assessments (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

Implications for the Field: Use of Data

The Child Care Policy Research Consortium, an alliance of ECE stakeholders, has asked, “What are the features of on-site consultation that are important to its effectiveness?” (Zaslow et al., 2005). While professional development programs can determine the effectiveness of a project based upon increases in classroom environments and child-level outcomes, it is difficult to determine specific elements of the model that contributed to the project’s success. In this article we have proposed reporting requirements beyond the often-cited measurements of ECE professional development: number of hours in course work, number of hours in mentoring, or number of college credits earned (Zaslow, Halle, McNamara, Weinstein, & Dent, 2005). Though important in describing details of the project, these measurements do not distinguish what made a program effective. Federal and state projects can contribute to the literature by requiring project staff to describe the content and process of mentoring in some detail.

Projects can begin by outlining a cycle of mentoring responsibilities expected for each visit. Detailed expectations on what the mentoring process will entail helps put teachers at ease and allows mentors to plan their time in classrooms. Because all mentors will be following a similar sequence of tasks, regardless of setting, the data collected allows mentors to review and share their experiences for mutual support. Project managers can also use data to look across a project to determine how best to improve mentor practice – should efforts be concentrated in a particular area of early literacy development or in a particular cycle of the mentoring protocol.

Finally, when projects collect their own data they can modify their work to fit the particular needs of their early childhood community. Often state and federal projects do not collect data that differentiates the needs of self-employed home care providers from those of educators working in regulated, center-based programs. In a survey of ECE experiences among center directors, home care providers, and center-based teachers, home care providers had on average over one-third more years in the field than center-based teachers (Gable & Halliburton, 2003). Of this group, nearly 50% had only high school training and no relevant training in child development or ECE. When offered access to low cost and conveniently scheduled experiences, professional development could become a routine practice for the home-based group of ECE colleagues.

Anecdotal information provided by ECEPD mentors parallels data collected in family child care homes – mentoring in home settings requires mentoring skills that are different from those needed in community-based classrooms. It is reasonable to assume that some ECE topics and pedagogy will require more attention than others in a home setting. The absence of data that distinguishes professional development needs across all learning environments preschool children are cared in, fails to advance quality across the entire early childhood field.

Conclusion

Research and experience have demonstrated that the use of mentoring is an integral component of early childhood educators’ professional development. Mentoring provides the link between pedagogical theory learned in college courses with the implementation of “lessons learned” to enhance both classroom practices and children’s learning outcomes. Yet, hidden within the model of mentoring are still many concepts to capture and analyze. Additional studies should explore the qualitative aspects of the mentor-teacher relationship. How time spent with resistant educators differs from time spent with teachers who are committed to self-reflection and change. Another question still left to answer is the adequate dosage of mentoring in a professional development model. If six visits is perhaps not enough to impact child-level outcomes, how many will help to ensure each child’s success?

The amount of time mentors spend visiting learning environments is not difficult data to collect. More challenging is developing a data collection strategy that yields information on what it is that mentors do during visits and specific content that is covered. When data based on time records that follow a specific mentor protocol are triangulated with information on literacy topics covered and scores from formal assessment tools – it is possible to plan professional development interventions that make the most effective and efficient use of mentors dispersed across many early childhood educational settings.

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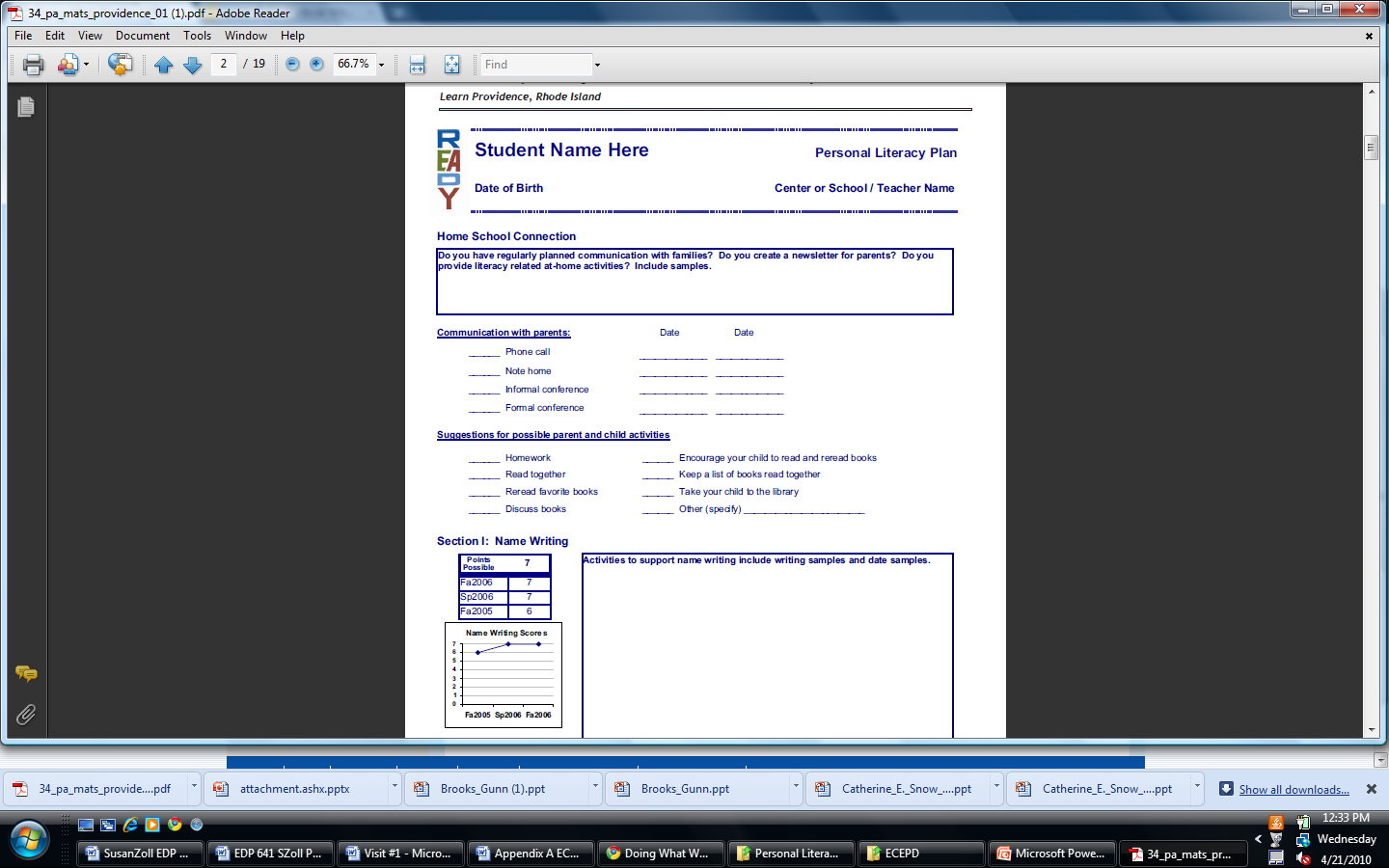
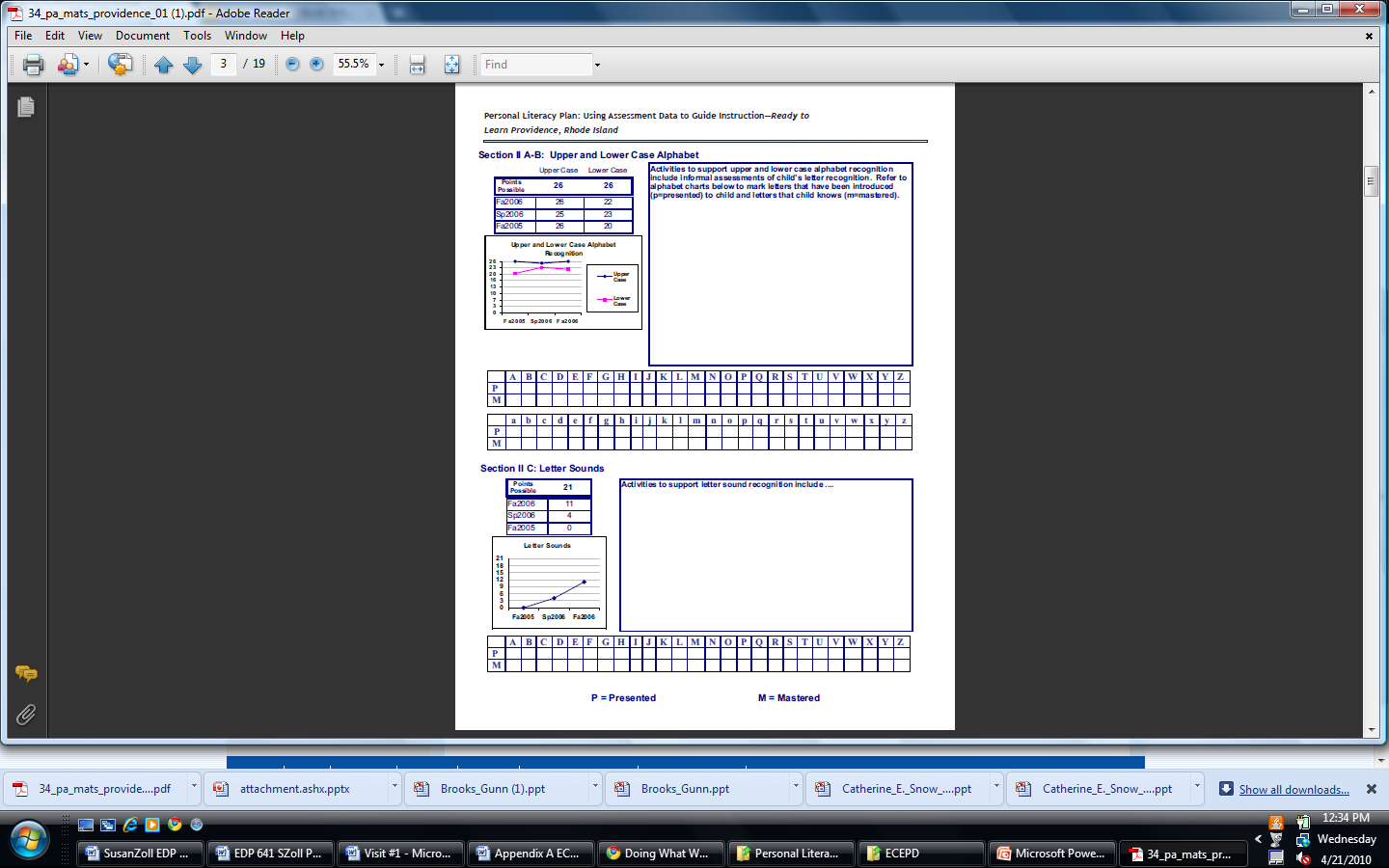
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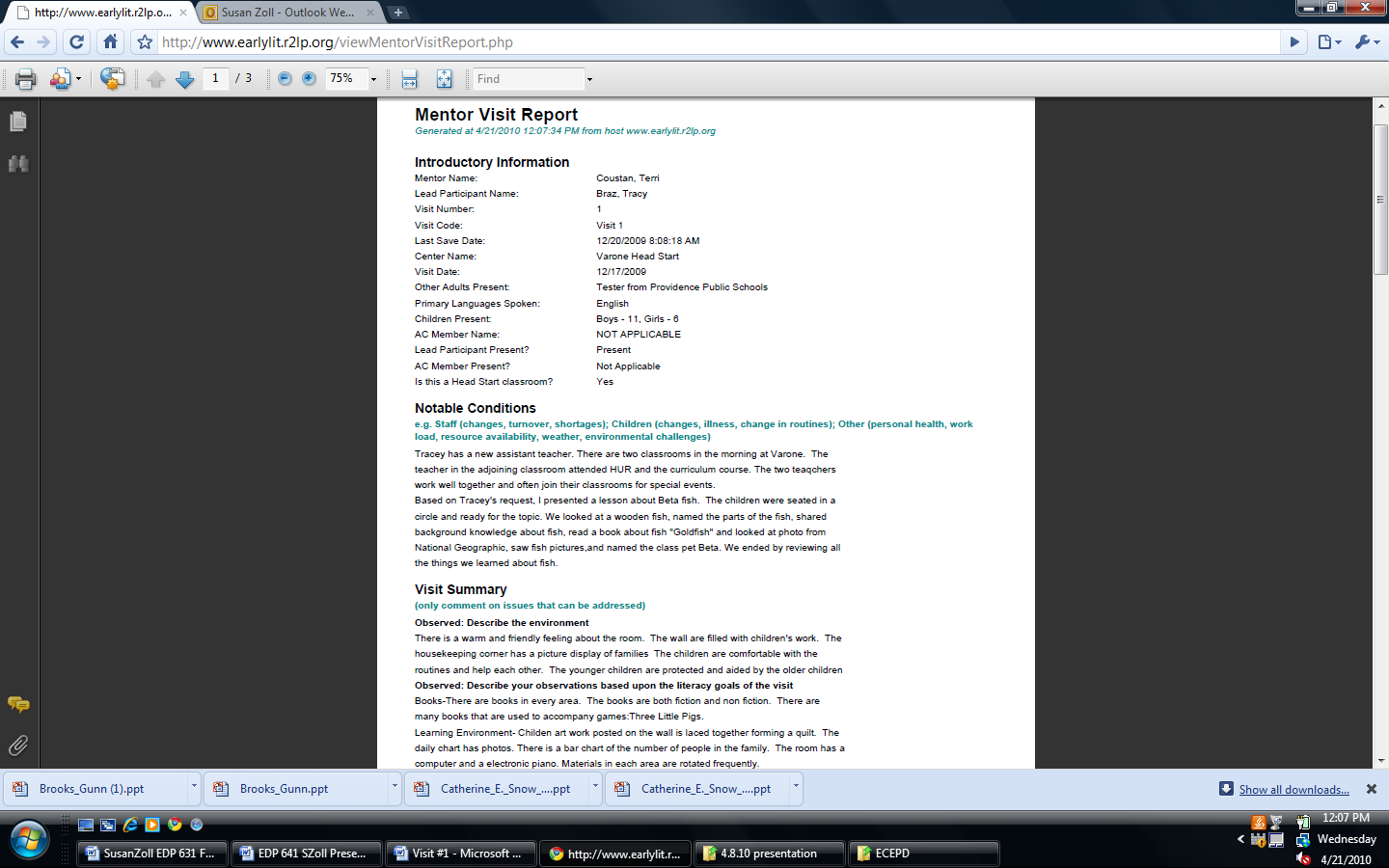
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**Appendix A – R2LP Personal Literacy Plans**

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**Appendix B: ECEPD online Mentor Format (R2LP)**



**Appendix B – Literacy Goals Mentor Visit #1 (HUR1)**

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| Mentoring Visit #1  Literacy Goals: Learning Environment (LE), Books (B), Environmental Print (EP) | |
| Learning Environment (LE)  A space, indoors or outdoors, that is planned and prepared for children to support their learning and development. | * An environment that supports children’s literacy learning * Areas and objects labeled with pictures and words * Comfortable places for children to read (reading corner or library area) * Books   + Placed on open shelves   + Rotated and refreshed throughout the year   + Connected to children’s learning placed around the room * Schedule of the day (with words and pictures) * Photos of children with their families and at play * Children’s artwork displayed   + Captions of child dictation talking about their work * Word walls * Cards with words that are meaningful to children |
|  |
| Books (B)  Practitioners understand that there are many different types of books to share with children: story books, fact books, board books, alphabet books, wordless books, multi-cultural, etc. | * Books are used in a variety of ways   + Read to children one-on-one   + Read to children in a small group * Encourage families to read to their child at home in their home language * Encouraging children to select their own books * Encouraging children to become active participants during Storytime * Linking books with children’s activities to increase children understanding and background knowledge. |
| Environmental Print (EP)  Environmental Print is the purposeful print (the code) and pictures practitioners add to the environment to support children’s literacy learning. | * Labeling areas and objects with words and pictures * Writing and displaying children’s names * Alphabet charts * Classroom theme/topic words * Job charts * Classroom attendance or in/out charts * Poems and charts displaying full group discussion |

**Appendix C – Time Spent in Mentor Code “Observation”**



**Appendix D(a) – HUR 1 Mentor Visit Summary**



**Appendix D(b) – HUR Visit Summary by Mentor Code by Classroom Type**

